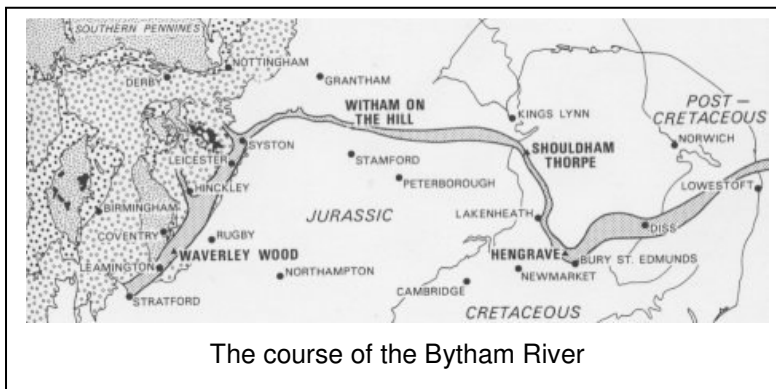


# Circular walk (Wilbury Hill, Ickleford, Cadwell, Wilbury Hill)

## Start at the car park to the south of The Wilbury Hotel public house

The car park is constructed in a small quarry, used for the extraction of gravel, as was a larger pit across the road. The gravel was deposited during one of the glacial episodes in the last Ice Age. Intriguingly, what is now the top of the hill here was originally the bottom of a river valley flowing from south-east to north-west, which was where the gravel was deposited. The river (or, more likely, stream) was part of an ancient river system known to geologists as the Bytham River, which would have been



laid down during the Cromerian interglacial (700,000 to 470,000 years ago). Subsequent glacial action eroded the softer rocks around it, during the Anglian (470,000 to 430,000). It was at this time that the Hitchin Gap was created, forming a drainage channel into the proto-Thames valley.

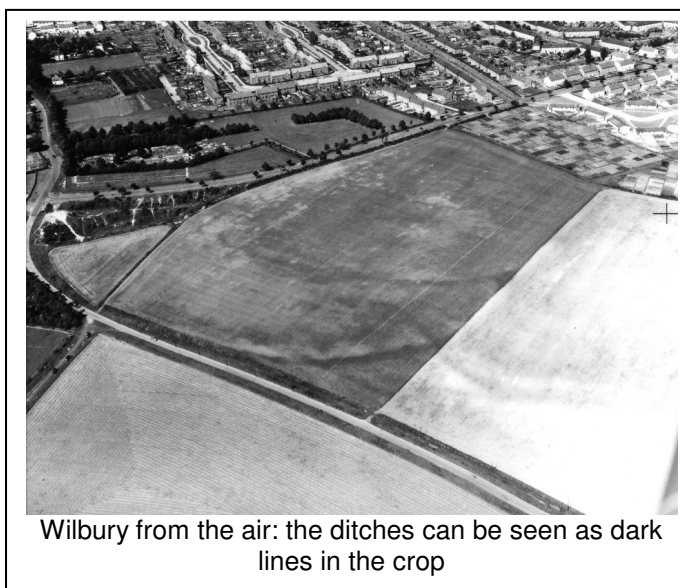
## Take care crossing the road towards the larger quarry!

The slight bank visible at the side of the road is thought to be part of the rampart of the Iron Age enclosure of Wilbury. The name is first recorded in some land boundaries written in 1007, where it is spelt *wiligbyrig*, meaning “at the willow fort”. This tells us that when the name was first coined, the site was covered in willow trees and that the ramparts were still visible.

Wilbury is usually regarded as a hillfort, a type of fortification that developed in the Late Bronze Age and continued to be used in some parts of the country right through until the Roman conquest in the first century AD. Many were subsequently re-occupied in the fifth and sixth centuries, whilst a few were also refortified in the tenth century. Intriguingly, an Anglo-Saxon burial was found here before 1892 with a tenth- or eleventh-century strap end. There are also Roman finds from the site, with a coin series dating from the late Republic to the late fourth century AD. The finds include a quantity of domestic material.

It is the so-called hillfort that has attracted most attention, though. Most traces of the ramparts had gone by the middle of the nineteenth century, although old Ordnance Survey maps show a complete oval circuit, extending halfway down the slope, across the Icknield Way and through the old Letchworth Cemetery. This is only part of the picture. Aerial photographs show that there are two enclosures: a complete oval enclosure to the east and, perhaps added later, a second oval enclosure joining its western side.

There have been several excavations here over the years. A number of poorly recorded diggings were performed in the nineteenth century. The first was by William Lucas and Joseph Lister around 1810; between 1848 and 1850, William Ransom dug on the site. In 1929, W H Lane and Percival Westell did some more exploratory work, and Westell returned to the site in the winter of either 1930-31 or 1931-32. The main source of information comes from the excavation carried out by Erik Applebaum in 1933-4, but in the years since he worked, our understanding of the Iron Age has improved a great deal and we can now say a lot more about the site than he could. Small-scale work was carried out by John Moss-Eccardt from 1959 to 1961 and again in 1974.



It has been found that before the ramparts were built, there was a palisade on their alignment. This is a common feature of the Late Bronze Age hilltop enclosures, which are often found to underlie later Iron Age enclosures. The south gate of the enclosure was identified in 1930 and lies at the point where the rampart of the western enclosure meets the eastern enclosure. The first phase of the gate left only a narrow entrance through an unfinished rampart and even when it was completed in a second phase, it remained small. It looks unlikely that this was the main entrance into the enclosure. During a third phase, after the ditch had filled up with material that had washed in from the collapsing rampart, a roadway was laid over it; this had happened by the middle of the first century BC, at the latest.

The position of the enclosure means that it is not a typical, classic hillfort. The position, on the edge of a plateau, is poorly chosen for defence and the history of the ramparts suggests that the first phase was never completed and the second phase short-lived. Even so, the density of features revealed by aerial photography suggests that the eastern enclosure was occupied for a long time, perhaps continuously from the Late Bronze Age through to the Roman period, well over a thousand years. The limited excavations that have taken place in the western enclosure, combined with the lack of features shown on aerial photographs is good evidence that this enclosure was not densely occupied. Cattle bones were the most frequent type from the site and it is possible that the western enclosure was in fact a stock enclosure, where cattle were corralled. This may be a clue to the function of the site: it looks to have been a primarily agricultural settlement.

## **Cross the road and walk along the Icknield Way path down hill towards Cadwell Crossing**

The Icknield Way has long been thought of as an important prehistoric long-distance track, running from East Anglia (some place its origin on the north coast of Norfolk, others place it near Great Yarmouth) to the Thames Valley. From Royston to the south-west, it follows the northern scarp of the Chiltern Hills. Some have viewed it as an important element in the distribution of flint work from the mines at Grimes Graves in Norfolk, which would suggest that it was in use by the fourth millennium BC. It is visible at Baldock as a broad track with side ditches in the early Roman period and it can be traced through to Blackhorse Road in Letchworth. Traditionally, it is thought to pass through Wilbury Hill, crossing the River Hiz at Ickleford (where the name has been seen as deriving from Icknield), passing south of Pirton via Wellbury (a 'lost' Domesday manor) towards Limbury and Luton. Early twentieth-century archaeologists noted that a group of names in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lie along the Icknield Way from Wallingford on the Thames to Limbury in Luton and concluded that it was an important strategic route in the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England.

Alas, it's not quite as simple as that. The first we know about the Icknield Way is a statement by the twelfth-century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth that one of his fictional kings of prehistoric Britain built a road from the east coast to the west. The name is first recorded in 1255 as *Hikenhilt*, but no-one has been able to explain it adequately. It has been speculated that it contains an echo of the tribe of the *Iceni*, the Romano-British inhabitants of East Anglia, but linguists dispute this. Few sections of the road were actually known as Icknield Way until the late Middle Ages and earlier names have been preserved; some stretches were not given the name until the eighteenth century, when antiquaries first started to look for its route.

All in all, the story seems quite complicated. In some places, Icknield Way is a genuinely ancient track, although it's difficult to see it as earlier than the Late Iron Age (if not the Roman period). Elsewhere, it seems not to have existed until the eighteenth century, when minor farm tracks were 'added' to make it a long-distance route. There is certainly no connection with Neolithic flint trading or Anglo-Saxon invasions, despite the romantic theories of earlier authors.

On the right hand side, crop marks have revealed what may have been a Neolithic long barrow, a type of monument built from about 4000 to 3100 BC.

As you continue down the hill, look up to the right. In the nineteenth century, some Roman burials were found towards the top of the slope. Nothing more is known of them, but they probably belonged to a farm situated nearby.

You are approaching a junction. Just to the south, a crop mark was seen by the farmer in very dry conditions in 1995. This was a green ring shape developing in the wheat as it ripened. These types of marks are generally the remains of destroyed round barrows, the ditch from which the barrow material was quarried showing up as a green mark. Round barrows were common from about 3000 to 1400 BC.

## **At the junction, you may either turn right and proceed to Cadwell Farm or continue along the track, past Hitchin sewage works towards Ickleford**

The railway bridge is a recent addition; formerly, Cadwell Crossing was a pedestrian level crossing; with the advent of very high speed trains, the footbridge was put up for safety reasons. The railway is part of the East

Coast Main Line running from London King's Cross to Edinburgh Waverley line, originally operated by the Great Northern Railway Company. It was built in 1850.

### **Pass between the abutments of the demolished bridge**

This bridge carried the now dismantled Hitchin to Leicester branch of the Midland Railway line. It was closed in 1962 as part of the infamous cuts imposed on the railways by Dr Beeching. It operated via Bedford and was opened in 1857.

On the left is an abandoned and flooded gravel quarry known as Gerry's Hole. The gravel was probably used in the building of the Hitchin to Bedford railway and there is a story that it is named after a workman on the railway who drowned in it. This is probably one of the sources of numerous Palaeolithic handaxes found in Ickleford during the nineteenth century.

### **Cross the river Hiz**

This was the site of the ford that gave Ickleford its name. It has now been bridged using rails and sleepers from the dismantled railway.

### **Enter Ickleford opposite the parish church**

Ickleford is not recorded before the thirteenth century (in the reign of Henry II) and is not found in Domesday Book. It is thought to have been included in the returns for Pirton and subsequently to have obtained its own identity through subinfeudation (a process where small parts of a manor were hived off to become manors in their own right, sublet by the tenant of the parent manor). During the thirteenth century, it was held by a family called Foliot; by 1303 it was in the hands of the Fitz Simons and later the Francis family. In 1585, Richard Francis mortgaged it to Thomas Ansell. It was sold again in 1776. The manor house is Ickleford House, south-west of the church.

The name is not connected with that of the Icknield Way: it seems to be derived from Old English *\*Icelingaford*, 'the ford of Icel's people'. Icel was the name of the founder of the royal dynasty of Mercia, which was known as the *Icelingas*; it is not clear if Ickleford preserves the dynastic name.

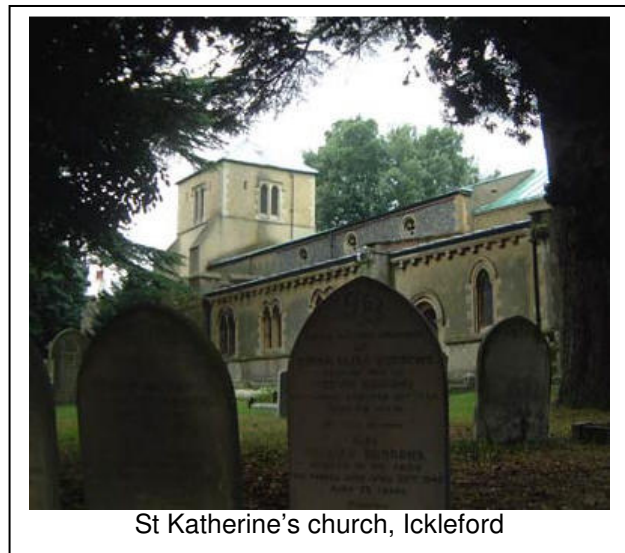
A second manor also appears in the thirteenth century, Ramerick, which was also held from the manor of Pirton. The descent of the manor during the Middle Ages is complex, but in 1520/21 it was conveyed to St John's College, Cambridge.

The church was a chapel of Pirton until divided in 1847; another chapel was recorded at Ramerick in the thirteenth century, but its whereabouts is no longer known.

The church of St Katherine has a nave of mid twelfth-century origin, with a thirteenth-century chancel and tower base. The porch was added in the fifteenth century. The whole church was heavily restored by Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1859.

The Old George is a sixteenth- to seventeenth-century timber-framed building.

The Post Office and adjoining tenements are seventeenth-century timber-framed buildings in origin, with many later additions.



### **Turn right and follow Arlesey Road through the village**

This part of Ickleford is known as Upper Green. On the right there once stood Pound Farm, with a seventeenth-century farmhouse and eighteenth-century barns; it was demolished in 1963 when the railway was dismantled. It is supposed to have been moated, but an excavation here by Hitchin Museum in 1965 proved inconclusive.

The village school was built in 1848 in a Tudor Gothic style, using brick and flint. It has several later additions.

Past The Cricketers, you enter a broader area, Lower Green, where the road takes a sharp turn to the right. Originally, it carried on past Lower Green Farm towards Arlesey; the present line is the old road from Lower Green to Cadwell.

Lower Green Farmhouse is of seventeenth-century or earlier origin, although it has been modified. The weather-boarded barn is also of seventeenth-century date.

The road crosses the River Hiz using a bridge built in 1844 – there is still a plaque recording that it was paid for by public subscription.

### **Pass under the railway bridge**

The present bridge is not the original, built in 1850, but a replacement built in 1900.

### **If you had turned left earlier, you will now be approaching the point where you rejoin the longer route**

In front of you is Cadwell, which is recorded from the thirteenth century onwards; it originally lay in Holwell and was part of Bedfordshire until 1894. The name means 'Cada's spring'.

Cadwell Farmhouse is seventeenth-century or earlier; it is a T-shaped timber-framed structure. The barns and other outbuildings are of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century date. The farm now specialises in growing lavender, a distinctive local product.



Growing lavender at Cadwell Farm

### **You may take a short cut at this point, following the path uphill away from Cadwell**

### **Walking along the main road, continue up the hill for a few hundred metres and locate the footpath on the right**

This footpath has traces of a plateway – a forerunner of railways used for guiding horse-drawn carts. Why one was established here does not seem to be known, although it may have something to do with the steepness of the gradient. Is it possible that wagons were hauled up the hill mechanically?

The path continues to climb the hill (if you had taken the short cut, you would rejoin us here). A little further on you pass the south end of Sparrowhawk Wood, a plantation built as a fox covert. Late Iron Age pottery was discovered here, although the circumstances are not known. It is over 500 m from both Wilbury Hill, where contemporary occupation is known, and the Romano-British burials to the south-west. It perhaps derives from another occupation site.

### **Carry along the path to re-enter the car park south of The Wilbury Hotel**

Journey's end!

**This archaeological walk has been produced by the North Hertfordshire District Council Archaeology Officer, who can be contacted on (01462) 434896 and [keith.matthews@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:keith.matthews@north-herts.gov.uk)**